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ABSTRACT

For completely unexpected reasons, a first-year teaching assistant's writing-across-the-curriculum composition course linked with the Indian Studies department at the University of North Dakota turned out to be a profound teaching/learning experience for him and his students. An important dynamic in the class was its unprecedented cultural balance--five of the students were Indian, and seven were white. Indian students are usually culturally alone in the classroom when they attempt to educate themselves outside of the Indian community. Indian students often find themselves alone in the "contact zone" (social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other). The most intimate of these contact zones is the composition classroom. A female student, a Chippewa and Metis, was extremely reticent in class for the first 6 weeks, and only began to speak out and set the class straight on some points of Chippewa/Metis history when the only other Chippewa/Metis student was absent. While the female student continued to be a full participant in the class, it remained a difficult thing for her to do. The dynamics of the class allowed all students, white and Indian, elements of "safehousing within the realm of the contact zone." Towards the end of the semester, the instructor's suggestion of meeting in culturally separate groups drew passionate responses from all quarters--the majority did not want to jeopardize what they had gained in the contact zone. (RS)

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"Teaching in the Borderlands: On Not Being Kevin Costner in a Native American Centered Classroom"

In the spring of 1992, I proposed to teach a WAC composition course the spring of 1993 which would be linked with the Indian Studies Department at the University of North Dakota. Students in my comp class would also be enrolled in an Intro to Indian Studies course, and we would try to integrate our curricula. I had just spent five years teaching high school English on the Navajo Reservation at Shiprock, New Mexico, where virtually all of my students had been Indian, and frankly, I was homesick when I was with my overwhelmingly white, Northern European UND composition students who looked just like me. My years on the Navajo Reservation had opened my eyes to the realization that much of this country, the whole of it really, is what Gloria Anzuldua calls a *Borderlands*. Says Anzuldua:

> ...the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy...where the third world rubs up against the first world and bleeds.

I didn't know what would come of this proposal. I was a first year GTA--the following spring seemed a long way off--and I had previously requested to teach the Native American comp section

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(Indians only) which has a long tradition at UND. My colleague Scott Lyons, to whom I owe much of the research in this presentation, ended up teaching that section.

My proposal was accepted, but the "link" itself was a flop. I was trying to coordinate with three different instructors with three different agendas. But the class, for completely unexpected reasons, turned out to be a profound teaching/learning experience for both me and my students.

It was a small class--twelve students--due to the complexities of advertising new courses and enrolling students in linked courses. The more important dynamic of the class, however, was its unprecedented cultural balance (outside the Indian Studies department). Five of the students were Indian. Seven were white. What follows are some of their stories.

Every spring at the University of North Dakota, the UND Indian Association sponsors a Wacipi--a celebration, or Powwow. It's a week long event filled with speakers, discussions, concerts, food, dancing, and art, and it culminates in a three day Powwow of major proportions--filling the campus auditorium. It is well attended by the Indian community, being the first major Powwow of the summer Powwow circuit. In Grand Forks, North Dakota, it's the only place where whites get the privilege to be in the minority.

After attending the Powwow last spring, Eric, a Dakota Sioux from Fort Totten Indian Reservation, wrote this in my composition class:

> I've always felt that I wasn't a part of this university, but after listening to some of the lectures and programs, a lot of

> other students feel this same way when they first come here. What you have to feel pride about is the university being a part of you *and not you a part of it*. Because when I leave here I'll use my experiences here to help influence my life, but I don't think the university will do the same at this time in life.
>
> When I attended the pow-wow it's funny how the beat of the drum can give a person a good feeling inside. This was one place I didn't feel like an outsider. I felt comfortable for once on this campus. It was nice just to listen to the songs and see the dancers and see friendly faces, not those silent dead stares of hate and snapping eyes.

The university has always been home-like to me, a middle class child of college educated parents. Forgive my apparent ignorance of the fact that university people frequently rip each other to shreds over money, but to me a university is still a place full of people I respect, people I love, people working to expand the realm of human understanding.

But this is not the university Eric sees, the one filled with "stares of hate and snapping eyes." What we educators know as our educational system, all the way from "Head Start" to the universities, is very much a Western Cultural construct. To many Indian students, schools have an extremely negative history due to the legacies of boarding schools and other white institutions, and what happens between the four walls of the classroom is suspect. It is no secret that the success of minority students, especially their success in higher education, is far from where it ought to be--particularly those John Ogbu has termed "involuntary minorities" such as blacks and Indians ("involuntary" due to the manner in which they were *involuntarily* either invaded or dragged here, as opposed to "voluntary minorities" who chose to come here). Here are some numbers:

The 327 Indian students currently enrolled at UND make up 2.7%

of the student population. That's 1 in 35 students, and puts UND in the top 10 amongst major universities.

The current six year retention rate of incoming freshman Indian students at UND is 30%, compared to 50% for all students.

In Bismarck, North Dakota, where I currently teach in a public high school, there is a rapidly increasing the number of Native American students. The number in the entire system (K-12) has grown from 287 in 1987 to 417 in 1993.

At Bismarck High School, the Indian population at the start of the 1992-93 school year was 72, approximately 5% of the student body. More than a third--32 of those 72--either transferred back to reservation schools or dropped out completely.

Of the 18 students who identify themselves as Native American in the high school classes I have taught at Bismarck High this 1993-94 school year, only 8 have participated consistently and successfully. Never have I had more than 3 in one section at the same time.

A great deal of attention has been placed on culturally biased curriculum for this kind of statistic, but I assert here that another, possibly more important, factor--at least for the Indian students that I have worked with--is the fact that Indian students are so utterly, culturally alone in the classroom when they attempt to educate themselves outside of the Indian community. In the classroom, as Mary Louise Pratt might say, they have no *safehouse*, no place "for healing and mutual recognition,...in which to construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world..."

Actually, there are campus safehouses. At UND there is a Native American Cultural Center, the UND Indian Association, INMED for health care fields, AISES for the sciences, and there is the composition section exclusively for Indian students which I mentioned earlier. All of these safe houses are extremely valuable

to Indian students, but invariably, they find themselves alone in what Pratt calls the *contact zone*--the "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today." The classroom. The most intimate of these contact zones is the composition classroom, where students are expected to share themselves through their writing not only with the teacher, but with the other students as well. This is the thing that makes the composition classroom so exciting for me, and it's exactly the thing that makes it difficult for many Indian students.

A Chippewa, Metis, and white mixed blood raised away from the reservation and accustomed to life in the contact zone, Rebecca began her first semester at UND as a traditional freshman. Her composition class was all white, except for her, the norm for most Indian students at UND. She "was used to being around non-Indian kids" from public school knew she "could deal with that," but when she found herself alone in a comp section with all white students, she was uncomfortable. About her writing, Rebecca says:

> I never tried to touch on issues that related with me. I tried to stay really surface and general. Never anything really personal. I'd write about something that meant nothing to me...because I knew I wouldn't have to sit and explain myself to all these kids that had no idea about Indians.

In general class discussion, too, she was intimidated. Once, when a visiting anthropology professor was making what she felt were unfair generalizations about Indians, she felt angry, but said

nothing because she "didn't feel comfortable with her own knowledge." Towards the end of the semester, she did speak up once when "there were a lot of prejudiced remarks being made," but it was a tense and confrontational moment--definitely not comfortable.

Our composition classrooms are often uncomfortable by design. Direct confrontation and argumentation are mainstream American cultural values--woe be it the political candidate who does not know where she stands on any issue. For the most part, however, confrontation is not an Indian cultural value. Describing other Indian students early on in our class, Rebecca says:

> [A female Indian student] kind of started to say little things here or there, but then she realized she was hearing her voice, and she got shy again. Quiet. And [a male Indian student] would kind of mumble something that no one could really hear, but he said something and I'd be like, "What did you say?" and he'd look at me like, "I didn't say nothing."

The male student Rebecca speaks of is Eric, who I quote earlier in this essay. The female student is Fluff, a Chippewa and Metis from Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation and a transfer from the tribal college there. In my class, she was extremely reticent for the first six weeks, in spite of the relative cultural balance. One day in class, we were discussing some historical aspect of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa. Rebecca and Roy, the only other Chippewa/Metis in the class, happened to be absent, and so Fluff, timidly at first, but with growing strength and indignance, began to set us straight on a few points. Later, she recalls:

> Remember the first day I did speak up? If Rebecca would have been there and knew what I knew and would have started talking...then I wouldn't have said anything. But nobody was there and I wanted [the other students] to understand about the Turtle Mountains--how it's Chippewa and it's Michif. Nobody else knew that or was saying anything, so I had no choice--but my voice was shaking.

She told me the fact that other Indians were present gave her the confidence to speak. Alone as a Chippewa, she found solidarity as an Indian as she explained the history of the Turtle Mountains. After that moment, she became a full participant in the class, though it remained a difficult thing for her to do. She says:

> If I was the only Indian in an all-white class, I don't think I'd be able to express myself, even if it was small...Maybe it's just me. Maybe I'm kind of prejudiced myself, but I can't feel comfortable. I don't know--they're different from me...I'm kind of a radical and I wouldn't want them to get mad at what I'm saying.

Roy, another Chippewa/Metis from the Turtle Mountains, also found empowerment in the class. He had spent his first semester in the Indians only section--a true safehouse--and had opted to take my class spring semester. Says Roy:

> I feel the [Native American section] helped me feel at home. It was the only class that I felt that I could talk there...By taking.the Native American section you can prepare yourself to defend your opinions in the other class (the linked section). If non-Indians say something, you can look back on discussions you had in the other section and express them. It has nothing to do with the teaching techniques or anything...

And about the culturally balanced section:

> It's really heated...[but] not only are we understanding their view, but they're understanding ours...You tend to think twice about saying something derogatory to the other race because those people are in there with you and you must communicate together--you *have* to understand...You have to re-word your sentences before you let them come out of your mouth.

The dynamics of the class allowed all students, white and Indian, elements of safehousing within the realm of the contact zone. As Roy mentions above, and as Pratt experienced with her students in a culturally diverse yet balanced classroom at Stanford, it is a playing field where tension, division, and anger

were frequent, but in our class, these things seldom, if ever, broke down strictly along cultural lines. What is more, the balance brought unity and understanding. For example, Mary, a white student, referred to Indian languages as *primitive* in class. This, of course, produced instant outrage, but Mary was allowed to work through what she was trying to say in the face of some very angry people (it was more of an unfortunate word choice than a racial slur). The event ultimately lead us to an exploration of the intricacies of language and its role in cultural conflict--making new meaning for both Indian and non-Indian students. In a conventional setting, chances are this episode would have ended in misunderstanding, hurt, and division, but in this safe contact zone, as Jim, another white student, says, "The learning goes both ways."

Towards the end of the semester, we talked in class about Pratt's concepts of the safehouse and the contact zone, and I suggested that we meet once or twice in culturally separate groups, safehouses, to discuss some of the issues we'd been working through in our writing. I told them we wouldn't do it without a consensus. The suggestion drew a passionate response from all quarters. James, a Dakota Sioux from Fort Totten said, "Why not have us divide up by basketball fans and hockey fans?"--his roundabout way of saying it was a stupid idea. Fluff said, "I think we should go for it. It might by fun and we might learn something from it." Eric asked, looking a Rebecca (who is a more obvious mixed blood than most), "What group is she going to be in?" It was one of those moments of crisis, and there was obviously on consensus, so

I had them write about it on the spot. Here are some excerpts:

> **Eric--Dakota Sioux**: Sounds like a good idea, but it might cause a split like us and them atmosphere.
>
> **Beth--Scandinavian**: My problem is not really separating, unless others have a problem with it, but I still don't think I would really talk anyway because I know some would still monopolize the time.
>
> **Catherine--Scandinavian, Married to a Chippewa/Metis**: The idea is to become compatible, not create or further advance separatism. I would rather we stay together and speak our minds as we can all learn.
>
> **Mary--German**: I don't see the difference between dividing up the groups and regular heated discussion in class. I know you are looking for something that would come out of a "safehouse," but I think we are comfortable enough with each other to talk about "hot" topics.
>
> **Rebecca--Chippewa/Metis**: I don't mind being divided. I'd like to sit with the other Indians cause that's where I feel more comfortable. The thoughts and humor are more like mine. But if they feel that I should sit with the other group, then that's where I'll go.
>
> **Jim--German**: Bad Idea! separating this class. We have come a long way from the beginning and we can say what we want. Sure we have to 'watch what we say,' but we still say it. Any way, we like each other--or at least we are understanding--to the point we can tolerate each others ideas without too much ill feelings.

There is much to dig in to in these responses that we don't have time to investigate here. I am touched by Rebecca's poignant humility about where she would like be identified after Eric's comment. And I was surprised when Beth, who I considered a fairly active participant, indicated that she felt others monopolized class discussions. However, what strikes me most is the value these students have placed on the relationships that have been forged. Says Eric, "it might cause a split like us and them atmosphere." The majority did not want to risk jeopardizing what we had gained in this contact zone, a dynamic learning atmosphere

that neither Indian student, nor white student, nor myself had experienced before.

Near the end of the semester, James knocked on the door of my apartment one afternoon. He is an older-than-average student, Dakota Sioux, who struggled as a writer. However, he had written one particularly powerful piece about growing up on the reservation which he read at a student reading during the Wacipi, and had made some important strides as a writer and thinker during the course of the semester. He was bashful, apologetic, and he had something to give me, he said. In his hand was a small cast figure of Coyote mounted on a glittering chunk of fool's gold which he once found covered with dust on the back shelf of a Colorado gift shop. He felt compelled to buy it, he said, and he wasn't sure why. Until now. "Now I know why I bought it," he said. "To give it to you."

I have Coyote with me today. It is fitting that he's mounted on fool's gold. One, because Coyote is an amoral trickster hero, and two, to remind me not to get too self important about what this all means. Not quite by design, we ended up in a culturally balanced composition classroom, and we took what was given us and made something good out of it. I like to think that Eric was wrong, and that his experiences at the university will influence its future as much as the university experience will influence him.